CHAPTER TEN

FISH FOR FEAST AND FAST
FISH CONSUMPTION IN THE NETHERLANDS IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES

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Introduction

In medieval Europe, fish was an important meat substitute. The consumption of fish had special cultural significance. Due to its natural qualities and cultural connotations, fish was well-suited to the pursuit of voluntary asceticism and concentration on spiritual matters during the many fast days prescribed by the Christian Church.

The view of asceticism was apparently dependent on status. The cultural historian Massimo Montanari describes, on the basis of Italian city chronicles, prestigious wedding feasts held during Lent at the end of the fourteenth century. Large, expensive fish were served in sumptuous, richly spiced sauces. On further consideration, it is not surprising that certain types of fish ranked as 'feast fish'. According to Richard Hoffmann, environmental historian and an expert on the medieval fishery, fresh fish, and especially large-sized fish (pike, large trouts, zander) and anadromous fish (salmon, sturgeon), were considered, certainly until 1300, food for the elite in the greater part of Europe. This was because only a few areas were situated directly on well-stocked waters. It was not until the late Middle Ages, with the expansion of long-distance trade in preserved fish and the rise of fish culture, that there was any change in this situation.[1] The great consumption of fish in periods of fasting does not exclude the possibility that fish was also eaten outside those periods, even before fast days had been established by the Church. More information has been made available about early medieval fish consumption of the (as yet unchristianized) Slavic peoples in the north

[1] I like to thank Richard Hoffmann and the editors of this volume for their valuable comments. Translation from the Dutch by Stacey Knecht. Montanari (1994) 86; Hoffmann (2001) 131–166; for fish culture in the southern Netherlands see chapter nine in this volume.

of Eastern Europe. It shows that religious rules were not necessary to make people eat fish.[2] New research also provides us with a better explanation for the expansion of the herring trade. Written and archeological sources indicate that it was not the consumption of meat restricted by the Church, but the growth of cities and populations, which form the most important explanation for the increase in the demand for fish. This led to an increase in the fish supply, and especially preserved fish such as pickled herring.[3]

Another point of consideration is: to what extent was fish consumption influenced by ecological factors? Could a large supply of fish also have determined interpretation of the fasting rules? What was the pattern of fish consumption in a coastal region like the Netherlands, where there was an abundance of fish, both freshwater and salt water? The English socio-economical historian A.R. Michell believes that salt water fish was the only accessible source of protein for the masses, especially in the coastal regions. In the Netherlands, there was a great wealth of variety. One can assume that there were large differences in the appreciation of various types of fish, and that this also involved social differences in consumption.

The Dutch fishery historian Y. Ypma notes that current notions of taste and edibility of certain types of fish are of little or no use in determining their commercial value in the past. Tiny freshwater fish, such as ruff, which, in the mid-twentieth century were rarely used for human consumption, were popular food in the Early Modern period. Salmon and sturgeon, on the other hand, also ranked among the more prestigious varieties of fish in the late Middle Ages, if only because of their increasing scarcity. Seal, porpoise, and swordfish were also highly valued 'fish'.[4] In this article, I will discuss both the cultural and ecological factors pertaining to fish consumption and, wherever possible, the economic aspects. The main question is: who ate what? This raises an important sub-question: to what extent did the availability of certain fish in certain ecosystems determine the social status of the fish on the table? Was rare fish 'luxury fish'? Another question is: how did access to certain ecosystems—inland waterways versus the sea, and the coast versus the interior—influence regional differences in fish consumption?

[2] Benecke (1987) 238.
[3] Lampen (2000) 60–64.
[4] Michell (1977) 134–184; Ypma (1962) 30–31; Hoffmann (1996) 649.

By way of an introduction, I shall examine the significance and role of fish in periods of austerity imposed by the Church. Extensive studies have already been done on gastronomic culture in the eastern Netherlands (Guelders, Brabant, Limburg).[5] I have done a sample survey of various archival sources from the western and central Netherlands, particularly Holland and Utrecht, from 1300 to 1600.

Fish-eating in periods of fasting

In the Middle Ages, there were different types of voluntary asceticism in preparation for various Church feasts; there was also diversity among the various societal groups. Voluntary asceticism in the forty-day period before Easter (Lent) was more stringent than on the regular, weekly days of abstinence. On such days, monks and nuns had a more frugal menu than the laity and more days per year with a limited menu. The voluntary asceticism of food, according to the Church, could take two forms: fasting and abstention. Fasting signifies a reduction in the number of meals, usually to one meal a day. Abstention means that certain foods are not eaten at all.[6]

Studies by Johanna Maria van Winter on late-medieval cookbooks and financial accounts originating from the Netherlands have shown that in the practice of daily eating, there were varying degrees of abstinence, as well as various combinations of fasting and abstinence. In the vernacular, the concepts acquired yet another connotation. Abstinence meant giving up meat only, while fasting implied a more stringent form of abstinence, which, in addition to meat, also included dairy and eggs.[7] The attitude towards dairy products, in particular butter, softened in the later Middle Ages. For Germany and Switzerland we know that the pope issued *Butterbriefe* (butter letters) that allowed the eating of butter on days of abstinence. The argument was often that the price of food used in times of fasting, in particular olive oil, was too high. Similar developments may have occurred in other northern European countries, like the Netherlands.[8]

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[5] Van Winter (1981) 338–348; Hupperetz and Van Winter (1995) 24–53, 54–75, 76–101.
[6] Freeman (1997) 65–83.
[7] Van Dam and Van Winter (2003) 395; Goudriaan (2003) 440.
[8] Zapp (1983); Hundsbichler (1984) 228–229.

In some languages, the word 'fasting' has taken on a specific meaning. In Dutch, for example, the forty-day period of Lent (Latin: *Quadragesima*) was (and is) referred to as '*Vasten*', which means 'fasting', even though it actually refers to a period of fasting *and* abstinence. In English, this confusing terminology has never arisen, because the word 'Lent' is used for the forty-day period. Medieval regimes of voluntary asceticism in the Netherlands all had one point in common: it was forbidden to eat meat.

By the end of the Middle Ages, fish-eating in periods of abstinence had become so much a matter of course that the fish appeared in literature and the visual arts as the symbol of Lent. In literature, an unusual constellation of symbols formed the fight between Lent and Carnival, in which meat and meat products as the symbol of Carnival were placed directly opposite fish. According to Montanari, the rhetorical struggle between Carnival and Lent intensified in the late Middle Ages.[9] It is not sufficiently clear from his research, however, whether this was indeed related to the increase in fish, posited by Montanari, in the consumption pattern during Lent. Another possibility is that the fish motif in the visual arts developed independently.[10]

In the late Middle Ages, artists often placed the fight between Lent and Carnival in a bourgeois setting. Perhaps the best-known example of this phenomenon is a painting by Peter Brueghel the Elder (died 1559).[11] The fight takes place in a Flemish town and is presented as a confrontation between two processions in the town square. On the left side of the painting, from the inns with the beer barrels out front, comes a procession representing Carnival. An obese man is being pushed along on top of a wine barrel, which is adorned with a large ham. The man bears, as his emblem, a long spit with a pig's head on the end. From the right side, from the church, the Lenten procession approaches. This is a procession of clerics giving alms to cripples, a clear indication that at Lent, abstinence goes hand-in-hand with charity. The Lenten procession is led by an old woman dressed in mourning. As an emblem, she carries two puny herring on a baker's paddle. In the middle of the square, at

[9] Montanari (1994) 92.

[10] The literary conflict of Carnival and Lent was more widespread and earlier than the visual one, see the war of Carnival and Lent dating from early thirteenth century France, edited in Lozinsky (1933).

[11] I have used the version of the painting from the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, described by Bernard (1908) 96; Glück (1910) 8, 15 and reproduced in Grossmann (1966) plates 6–12; compare: Henisch (1976) 38.

the very centre of the painting, two women are washing large fish at the well. They offer them for sale at a fish stall. To the left of the well is a pig, rooting about in the dirt: a familiar sight in any medieval town, but particularly well-chosen here, as a symbol of the fatty Carnival diet.[12]

A northern-Netherlandish example in the same tradition can be found in a Carnival song. The song is printed in a satirical Shrove Tuesday pamphlet dating from the mid-sixteenth century and originating in the vicinity of Jutfaas, near Utrecht. The carnival song is part of a parody on two celebratory songs, in which the notes on the staff are replaced by various foods. The song at the top of the page is about Carnival. The notes are rendered as fool's caps, roasted meat, poultry, and a variety of fancy drinking vessels. The bottom song, about Lent, shows typical Lenten food, especially fish: flatfish, a stockfish, mussels, an eel, and for the rest, turnips (or swedes), onions, and simple drinking vessels.[13]

For a deeper understanding of the significance of fish in periods of abstinence, it is useful to describe the meaning of fish and the material reasons for abstinence.[14] To begin with, fish had an important allegorical significance. Jesus, at the beginning of the description of his evangelical life, was referred to as the fisherman, and his believers were the fish. Under the influence of the creed contained in the acrostic *Ichthys*, the Greek word for fish, the meaning of fish later shifted to Jesus himself. There are other stories in the Bible in which fish plays an important role and symbolizes the believers 'caught' by Jesus and his apostles, such as the 'miraculous draft of fishes' at the Sea of Tiberias.[15]

A second, symbolic motif is that fish is a low-fat foodstuff that is well-suited to the required mental attitude of forbearance and self-discipline. For most people in the medieval subsistence society, a fatty diet was a sign of wealth and abundance. A concrete example is provided by the relatively high costs of pork and the demand for seal fat in the fasting period in the Netherlands.[16] This was also endorsed by

[12] In Holland, women were active in the local fishing trade. This may have had to do partially with the division of labor. Fishing was done by the men, during the night, when many fish become active. When the men went home to rest, the women went to the market. Huizinga (1911) 504. Many women's names appear among the fish mongers in the accounts of the Abbey of Egmond: Haarlem, Rijksarchief in Noordholland (RANH), Egmond, inv. nr. 800 (1499/1500) f. 9v; Pigs were common in towns. Smit (2001) 27.

[13] Hogenelst and Van Oostrom (1995) 294; Pleij (1983) 253–254.

[14] Montanari (1994) 92; Henisch (1976) 32; Hoffmann (2000) 337.

[15] In the Bible: Marc 6:30–44; John 21:1–14; Matthew 4:17–22.

[16] Delen (2002) 58.

a 'scientific' motive. Leading medieval theologists, such as Thomas of Aquino (thirteenth century) argued that fish was cold-blooded, which promoted the contemplation necessary during the fast. Meat, on the other hand, was 'hot', and thereby stimulated the sex drive. This doctrine dates back to earlier pronouncements by ecclesiastical authorities, such as St. Isidore of Seville and St. Benedictus of Nursia, and was also based on the dietetics of ancient times.

In classifying the animal kingdom, problems arose that were of importance to the compilation of the menu. Essentially, all aquatic animals were classified as fish, but there were certain borderline cases, particularly among aquatic mammals, such as the beaver and seal. In the sixteenth century, the seal was considered Lenten food in the Netherlands. The Scheveningen fish expert Adriaen Coenen, in his *Visboek* (*Fish Book*) of 1578, classifies the seal with fish, immediately below herring, and writes that he has sent various types of seal to Brussels, Mechelen, and Antwerp, where, particularly at Lent, there was a demand for this delicacy. One of his customers may have been the court of the Catholic William the Silent, Prince of Orange, in Brussels. On a Friday in Lent in 1565, when the English ambassador was his guest of honour, there was seal on the menu.[17]

The influence of the availability of fish

An interesting question is whether or not more fish was eaten in coastal regions than in the interior. One indicator could be the number of meatless days per year: did Church rules differ per region depending on proximity to water, or did people simply have different eating habits? The presupposition is that on meatless days, mostly fish would have been eaten, but this is not tenable.

Studies by Van Winter show that in the Netherlands, on the menu on days of abstinence, dairy and eggs played an important role, in addition to fish. In the sixteenth century, the Church in the northern Netherlands was even more tolerant of dairy, particularly butter. Presumably this was related to the fact that the substitute for butter, olive oil, was difficult to obtain in the North, and costly, in contrast to southern Europe. Moreover, with the spread of the pastoral economy in the late Middle

[17] Egmond (1997) 114; Delen (2002) 151.

Ages, the supply of butter increased. At the court of Prince William of Orange, for instance, an average of two and a half times as much butter was consumed on fish days as on meat days. The Dutch custom of serving melted butter with fish has continued to this day.[18]

In the Dutch town of Leiden in the sixteenth century, guests at the local hospice ate fish and eggs, alternately, on meatless days.[19] Other sources confirm that eggs functioned as a full-fledged substitute for meat, in addition to fish. The eating and production of eggs deserves further study. A proportion of the eggs probably came from chickens, but egg consumption can also be explained by the great numbers of water and meadow birds found in the western and northern Netherlands, a low-lying, wetland-like region. Thousands of wild swans, geese, ducks, and other wild water-birds were listed annually in the income columns of the accounts of the Count of Holland and other large landowners.[20]

A difficult issue in the study on regional differences in dietary habits is that the religious rules have not been handed down to us in their entirety. The more inland areas fell under the diocese of Liège, from which the most important document containing the rules for fasting has been preserved: the *Vastenbul* (Episcopal bull for Lent).[21] The Vastenbul was issued in 1288 and remained valid until 1618. It is not known what the rules entailed in the areas along the coast of the North Sea and the Zuiderzee (Groningen, Friesland, Drenthe, Overijssel or Oversticht, Utrecht, Holland, and Zeeland), because the Vastenbul of the diocese of Utrecht has not been handed down. It is generally assumed that they were fairly similar to those of the diocese of Liège, but that is hardly satisfactory for our purpose.

Another way to study consumption patterns is to compare cookbooks and the financial accounts of large households. The practice with regard to fasting and abstinence in the Netherlands has recently been explored by, among others, Johanna Maria van Winter, Freya Wolf, Annemarie Speetjens, Maret Zonneveld, Raymond van Uytven, and Marie Ange Delen.[22] These studies have shown that in the eastern Netherlands, abstinence for the laity was in effect for the entire forty-day period

[18] Hundsbichler (1984) 229; Van Winter (2002a) 198–200; Hupperetz and Van Winter (1995) 60; Delen (2002) 157.
[19] Ligtenberg (1908) 112.
[20] Van der Gouw (1980) 299; Hamaker (1876) 653.
[21] Habets (1875) 455–456, 464–465; Consgen (1826) 6.
[22] Hupperetz and Van Winter (1995); Van Uytven (1998) 151–193; Delen (2002).

before Easter, and for the *vigils* (days preceding the fixed holy days, such as All Saint's Day and the feasts of Mary). In addition, abstinence was required on all Fridays and Saturdays in the regular weeks. From the mid-fifteenth-century financial accounts of the courts of the Duke of Guelders and his family, it is apparent that the Vastenbul of Liège was strictly adhered to. At the ducal court in Venlo, abstinence was practiced on Friday and Saturday and, by a smaller group of people, on Wednesday as well. An example of a fast observed there was Saint Andrew's Eve on 29 November 1468. On the menu were fresh fish and stockfish.[23]

In Holland, moreover, Wednesday appears to have been a third weekly day of abstinence, but did that apply to everyone? An early source for the court of the Count of Holland is the court accounts for the years 1358–1361. In a separate section, the *pourvance* (provisions, victuals) is a record of which food has been delivered by which supplier to which section of the court.[24] In June 1359, the kitchen prepared salmon several times, on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays.[25]

Another detailed source, yet covering only a very brief period, is an appendix to the 1516 account of the Regional Water Authorities of Rijnland (*Hoogheemraadschap van Rijnland*) in Holland.[26] It concerns an account of what several minor Water Authorities officers ate from day to day, from 10 August to 7 September 1516, during repairs to the Spaarndammer Dike. All costs are noted, but there is no mention of quantities.[27] There were three regular days of abstinence per week: no meat was eaten on Wednesday, Friday, or Saturday. On each of these days of abstinence, butter was served and alternately eggs or fish. Within this period was an important holiday: the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary on August 15. The night before, on the vigil, the officials fasted on a simple meal of bread, fish, and herring, without butter.

The practice of weekly abstinence in Holland appears to have been that people refrained three times a week from eating meat: on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. On these days, fish, eggs, and dairy products (such

[23] Hupperetz and Van Winter (1995) 31; compare: Henisch (1976) 28.
[24] De Boer (1997a) 408–436, 492–512, 580–589.
[25] De Boer (1997a) 424–425.
[26] Account of Claes Wolwijn from 10 August 1515 to 7 September 1515, Leiden, Hoogheemraadschap van Rijnland, account of 1516, oud-archief, inv. nr. 9533, appendix.
[27] The Spaarndammer Dike, the dike at the southern coast of the sea arm IJ, ran from Amsterdam to Haarlem. It broke at several places after a storm surge on September 30, 1514, Gottschalk (1975) 375.

as cheese and butter) were eaten. Two additional references support the small selection of archival sources and source studies described above. In the fifteenth-century rule for the laity in the *Spieghel ofte reghel der kersten ghelove (Mirror or Rule of the Christian Faith)*, Wednesday was a meatless day. Christina Ligtenberg, in her study on poor relief in Leiden, reports that hospice guests in the sixteenth century ate no meat on the three days mentioned above, only fish or eggs.[28]

The Wednesday observed in Holland as a day of abstinence was supplementary to the Friday and Saturday as prescribed in the Vastenbul of Liège. This additional abstinence, however, was also observed by a certain group of people at the court of Guelders, where the Liège bull was in force. What could have been the reason for this practice? Do the sources about three weekly days of abstinence in Holland derive from a unique context, the need to attain something through especially strict abstinence, such as the elevation of one's own virtuousness? Or was it simply natural, with the plentiful availability of fish so near the coast, to eat it as often as possible, certainly on days when moderation was a tradition, even though abstinence from meat was not actually prescribed for the laity? Was the latter also the reason that people at the court of the Counts of Holland ate salmon, when it was in season, on Wednesday?

It is worth noting that in a hospice, people hoped to be cured, and according to Christian doctrine, God's will and mercy were of great importance to this endeavour. On the dike, something comparable occurred: here, too, God's help was needed to ensure the success of the repair project. In the dike ordinances for several projects on the south IJ Dike, repeated reference was made to God's help, along with assurances that the dike workers were faithful churchgoers. On this dike, crosses had also been placed next to sealed holes, possibly to mark places of worship. Perhaps extra-pious behavior was considered a means of winning divine assistance.[29]

One can roughly estimate the numbers of meatless days a year. If one begins with the abovementioned findings for the Netherlands for all the days in the forty-day period of Lent (six weeks), plus at least two days of abstinence a week (46 × 2), the total is 132 days a year for the laity.

[28] Ligtenberg (1908) 112.

[29] Van Dam (1998) 256–259; extensive source text references in: Van Dam (2003) note 51.

There were also various holy days whose regular fast did not fall on a Friday or Saturday, which means we have to add even more days of fasting. For some groups of laity, there was even a third, regular, fixed meatless day per week, so this group ate no meat for at least 178 days a year. This custom was probably more widespread in Holland than in the interior. In short, it is no exaggeration to state that at least forty percent of the days of the year were meatless for the laity in the Netherlands. For clerics, this percentage was considerably higher. Goudriaan has made an attempt to quantify the fast days and days of abstinence, based on the rules of the *Broeders van het Gemene leven* (Brothers of the Common Life).[30] The *Broeders* belonged to the *Moderne Devotie* (Modern Devotion), a movement of lay communities originating in the eastern Netherlands in the fourteenth century. Their lifestyle fell somewhere between the regular orders, such as the Cistercian monks who never ate meat, and the ordinary laity. The Broeders observed more than 175 meatless days each year.

Although there are indications that coast-dwellers ate less meat than people living in the interior, this does not necessarily mean higher fish consumption: as described above, there were plenty of good meat substitutes available in the Netherlands in the form of eggs and dairy, and this supply would have been even higher along the coast.

Which fish were feast fish?

Differences in social status were expressed in the dietary pattern, even on days of abstinence. How can a historian examine which foods were considered luxury foods, or even prestigious?

Descriptions of feasts are the most accessible. In my introduction, I cited the example of the wedding banquets in Piacenza at the end of the fourteenth century. In Lent, a special menu was customary, in which only fish was served. The meal began with a drink, and a selection of sweets. Then came figs with shelled almonds, followed by large fish in pepper sauce. The following course consisted of rice soup with almond milk, sugar and spices, and salted eel. This was followed by fried pike in vinegar or mustard sauce, served with warm wine and spices. Des-

[30] Goudriaan (2003) 440.

sert consisted of nuts and fruits.[31] This example clearly shows—by the commentary of the chronicler and its place in the story—that the meal and its components were considered prestigious.

With other sources, standards and values pertaining to the social status of the food are less evident. There are no such detailed city chronicles or similarly descriptive, qualitative sources for Northern Europe in the Middle Ages. The English medievalist Chris Dyer has studied financial accounts and taken, as a criterion for prestige, the types of fish that were given as gifts to prominent people and fish that was eaten at meals with prominent guests.[32] Judging by such texts, and supplemented with commentaries on ingredients in such sources as cookbooks, we can also look at it from the opposite point of view. When, in a source with little or no context (such as a shopping list or a kitchen account) a group of ingredients appears which are known to be luxury items (such as spices and dried fruits), we can also classify the other ingredients as 'refined' and the consumers as 'well-to-do'. A comparable method is applied among archeologists to the finding of food scraps, such as fish bones and other skeletal remains, recovered in garbage heaps, under kitchen floors, and in cesspits. The status of the house or other artefacts provides the necessary information about the social class of the eaters. If the status of the house is unknown, however, one may conclude, for example in an excavation in which sturgeon remains are found, that one is dealing with a prosperous household.[33]

One example that makes clear how careful we must be in the interpretation of sources concerns fish heads. Captain Lambert Gerijtsz, in the Kampen toll account of 1438–1441, declared 450 codfish heads.[34] Fish heads, regardless of the type of fish, would seem to belong irrefutably to the diet of extremely poor people. Fish heads are offal or table scraps, good for subordinates and household pets. In excavations of fishing communities in Scandinavia and elsewhere, heaps of fish heads indicate processing of (dried) fish for commercial purposes. The fact that there was a trade in this product, and that fish heads appear in great number in financial accounts, together with luxury fish (like eel), makes one wonder if fish heads, for some eaters, were a delicacy after all.

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[31] Montanari (1994) 86.
[32] Dyer (1988) 27–38.
[33] Neer and Ervynck (1996) 157; Ervynck (1999); Ashby (2002) 40–45; De Jong (1997).
[34] Smit (1919) 255.

A servant to the bishop of York declared that he knew of no more delicious food than fish heads. To deny himself this food in honor of Saint Barbara was no easy task. But it was obviously a good strategy, because the saint saved him from a watery grave and secured him a Christian burial after his shipwreck.[35] This incident is recorded in a collection of miraculous tales that were especially popular among the members of the aforementioned Modern Devotion. Here, as with the Cistercians, an austere diet aided in the pursuit of the perfect life. In this sombre environment, fish heads probably *were* a delicacy. This might explain the recovery of a large quantity of fish-head bones in the cesspit of the Mother Superior in the female cloister of the Third Order in the town of Oldenzaal, near the center of the Modern Devotion movement. The excellent state of the bones led archeologists to assume that they had not been used for soup, but should be regarded as offal.[36] This is surprising. It seems to me that a third variation is possible: the fish heads were cooked only briefly, or fried, and eaten, leaving the bones behind, fairly intact. The heap of heads was certainly not a sign of a processing site. We have no reason to assume that these women processed fish for commercial purposes.

The way in which the fish heads were used is of great importance. In a household account from the prominent Benedictine Abbey near Egmond, hundreds of codfish heads are listed. This account concerns a diking project at the end of the fourteenth century. It comprises two separate sections for food purchases: one for the abbot and employers, and one for the dike workers. It is notable that the fish heads appear here in the elite section of the account, in the company of eel, a luxury fish. The explanation of these particular fish heads seems simple: jellied eel. Fish heads were often used for making gelatine.[37] The example of the fish heads shows that fish parts, on their own, have little significance as status indicator of a meal. The method of preparation adds an important dimension and ultimately determines the significance of the ingredient. This seems to be less so for whole fish.

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[35] The Hague, Royal Library, ms. 71 H 6, Voorschriften van het lekebroedershuis van (het klooster van) de reguliere kanunniken in Groenendaal, [Rules of the lay-brothers house of (the monastery of the) regular canons of Groenendaal] 1475, f. 117r–120v; Van Dijk (1999) 235. I owe this reference to Dr. van Dijk—many thanks!

[36] Ulrich (2000) 79; Laarman (1999) 59–62.

[37] Haarlem, RANH, Egmond, inv. nr. 798 (1388/89) expenses of Jan Boen, 56; compare pike and carp heads in recipe nr. 193 in De Cocboek of 1593, website edition>: http://www.kookhistorie.com, published edition: Willebrands (2006).

Luxury fish

Which types of fish were considered 'feast fish' in the Netherlands? The most unique fish found in the great rivers was definitely the sturgeon. These fish, which measure 3.5 meters in length and weigh 300–400 kilograms,[38] are, as it were, the dinosaurs of the underwater world, accidental 'survivors' from another era. Sturgeons have no scales, but are covered with bony plates; they also have no teeth, but small, fleshy-lipped mouths through which they suck in their food. Although the fish is now best-known for its caviar, the sturgeon was once caught for its flesh, too. Coenen sold small, possibly undersized sturgeons weighing 50 kilograms. He remarks that sturgeon tastes like pork.[39] The Count of Holland found the fish worthy enough to be presented, as gifts, to distinguished people. On February 8, 1393, he bestowed two sturgeon, caught in the Gelderse IJssel, on the Lord of Altena. Two sturgeons caught in the Meuse were brought back to his court in The Hague.[40] They may then have been preserved for the season of Lent. This, in any case, is what happened two centuries later, at the same court. At the end of the sixteenth century, the steward of the Nassau estates in Geertruidenberg had three sturgeons pickled in fifteen small barrels every year and shipped to The Hague.[41] Sturgeon was also eaten at the Nassau court in Breda. There is archeological and written proof to support this fact. On the one hand, there are the skeletal remains of sturgeon, found in the castle garbage chute in a layer dating from 1530–40; on the other hand, there is a specification in the kitchen account of April 1553 for the delivery of two sturgeon. The fifty crawfish delivered along with the sturgeon undoubtedly lent the table a festive appearance.[42]

Of all the fish that are able to survive in fresh water, pike, eel, salmon and carp were certainly favorites in the Netherlands. Eel and salmon are both migratory fishes. They were caught in rivers and inland waterways.[43] In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Dutch towns and cities gave gifts of pike, eel, and salmon to important officials. At a banquet in 1511, for instance, the town of Dordrecht presented the governess with a salmon.

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[38] Hoffmann (2005) 25. In the Netherlands, the sturgeon became extinct at the beginning of the twentieth century.
[39] Cited in: Ypma (1963) 31.
[40] De Boer (1997b) 40.
[41] Martens (1992) 113.
[42] De Jong (1997) 121–129: table 4; Delen (2002) 157.
[43] On eel fishing and trade: Van Dam (2003b).

The stadholder and other high nobles also received such honours.[44] Sometimes one can tell by the name of the fish that an exceptionally large specimen was concerned. The *schafteling*, for example, was a large, old eel. In England, clerics and city officials showed their mutual respect by sending each other 'great eels'.[45] In Gouda it was traditional to offer the Franciscans a banquet on the name day of their patron saint, around October 4. In 1507, this banquet consisted of pike, eel, sea fish, herring, raisins, and spices.[46] Salmon was also a favorite at the court of Voorne in the fifteenth century. In the east, eel and salmon were less common, but the costly pike and carp were occasionally purchased.

The carp deserves our special attention. In the kitchen account of the court of Guelders are several mentions of carp. Speetjen's study of two fifteenth-century cookbooks shows that 34 percent of the recipes call for fish, mostly carp or pike.[47] Carp is a cultivated fish. It originates in the Danube basin and was not originally found in Western Europe. From the thirteenth century onwards, carp farming expanded, and carp that had escaped from ponds became feral in the Netherlands.[48] That is why carp does not appear in sources from the western Netherlands until fairly late, and, I believe, also explains why it was a luxury fish. Carp were still rare. According to the detailed treatises that have been handed down to us about carp farms, pike was often set in the carp ponds as a side crop, to eat the fry. The carp were grouped together in the ponds according to their age, and were kept there until they had grown as large and fat as possible. Did the court of Guelders have its own carp farm, or did they buy carp from another farm? And where might that have been?

In 1991, during excavations, a construction was found under the castle at Venlo that resembled a *leefbak*, a trough of water in which fish could be preserved for a long period of time. That is particularly useful for carp, because they can live for a very long time in low-oxygen

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[44] Haarlem, Streekarchief Kennemerland, stadsarchief Haarlem, inv. Enschede, kast 19–10, f. 193; Damen (2000) 391–404.

[45] Dyer (1988) 31, 33.

[46] Gouda, Regionaal Archief, Oud-archief Gouda, inv. nr. 1169, f. 20v; idem 1172, f. 14v, idem 1174, f. 17; compare a similar meal offered to the Franciscans by the town of Dordrecht in 1512, Dordrecht, Gemeentearchief Dordrecht, oud-archief I, inv. nr. 443, f. 123; Tresoriersrekening 1453/54, Haarlem, Streekarchief Kennemerland, stadsarchief Haarlem, inv. Enschede, inv. nr. 19–30, f. 35, 36.

[47] Hupperetz and Van Winter (1995) 84.

[48] For carp culture in the southern Netherlands, see Deligne, 'The carp and the city,' in this volume.

water. In this way, people could build up the supply that was necessary for Lent. According to Hoffmann, during Lent, cultured carp were, for the elite in the interior of Europe, the most important fish that was available fresh and in large quantities.[49] In Holland at the end of the sixteenth century, carp was already wild and widespread. According to Coenen, carp was an important fish and considered in Holland to be the tastiest and most popular of all freshwater fish. It was 'eaten by the rich and luxurious people during their feast meals.'[50]

Among the most popular sea-fish were haddock and cod. In the account year 1395–96, the treasurer of the Count of Holland bought nine wagonloads of cod in Scheveningen, as gifts for various nobles on Shrove Tuesday.[51] The fifteenth-century court of Voorne stocked up on haddock and cods during Lent. In Venlo in 1468, haddock appears as a luxury item.

The menu of the Knights Hospitallers of the Order of St. John in Haarlem, in 1570, is so detailed that a distinction in consumption pattern can be made between holidays and ordinary days on the one hand, and lords and servants on the other.[52] The first course for the main meal of the lords (not knights, in Haarlem, but priests) on Sundays in Lent offered (salted?) herring and *bokking* (smoked herring), the second course consisted of a choice of cods, perch, pike, salmon, roach, dab, or flounder, with a final course of fried fish or oil cake. On weekdays, fried and boiled eel were eaten, as well as cod, bream, pike, plaice, fried and boiled herring. On Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, for the servants, there was fried and boiled herring, plaice, roach, and stockfish. The servants never ate large, fresh white fish (cod), or large, fresh, freshwater fish (pike, salmon, bream), but they did eat small, fresh, sea-fish (herring and plaice), small freshwater fish (roach), and stockfish (dried cod). In this list, it is apparent that (fresh) cod, pike and salmon were among the most prestigious fish, eaten only by the privileged few. In Haarlem, bream was also a luxury food. Bream is a typical example of a fish from the muddy peat lands. This is probably

[49] Extensive on carp culture: Hoffmann (2002). Feral carp probably appeared in the coastal plain of Holland by the end of the 15th century, Haarlem, Rijksarchief Noord-Holland, Rekening van de keuken [Kitchen account of] 1496, Abdij Egmond, inv. nr. 799, f. 15bv.

[50] door de rijcke weelderige luyden in hoore feestmalen gegeten' Coenen, *Visboek*, f. 199, 201, cited in Ypma (1963) 31.

[51] De Boer (1997b) 513.

[52] Van Winter (2002a) 204–212; Van Winter (1996) 303–318.

why it appears less frequently in the diet or menu of the East. In 1571, carp also appeared on the menu. Carp thrives in comparable circumstances and, at this time, had just become indigenous to Holland, as explained earlier.

What makes a fish 'a feast fish'? In the third course of the wedding banquet in Piacenza, 'large' fish were served: clearly, the size itself gave enough information about its high status. The significance of the size was accentuated by the accompanying sauce, which was highly seasoned with the costly spice pepper. The example of Piacenza shows a general characteristic of prestigious fish that seems to hold true everywhere: large fish are better than small fish. The fish I have listed above are all large—or at least, they can be. Cod and haddock rank among the larger sea-fish; pike, salmon and eel are among the larger freshwater fish. Another example, taken from a completely different context, shows that large fish were very desirable. Cistercian monks, as it happens, were forbidden to eat fish, in particular in the early period, and large fish was a real sin. Apparently a 'test' was done at the Pearly Gates whenever there was any doubt about allowing a monk into Heaven. The monk's stomach was opened, and if there were large fish inside, such as salmon and pike, he could not possibly have been a (good) Cistercian monk.[53]

'Large' was usually synonymous with 'scarce'. Large fish are at the top of the food chain. In an ecosystem there is a relatively large amount of small fish and few large fish. Moreover, large fish are hard to catch. Big, strong nets or large fixed installations are needed, and often boats, which requires a considerable financial investment and a sophisticated form of organization. This was especially true for salmon, which swim in the main flow of the river, so installations have to be sturdy. Salmon fishing was subject to regal fishing rights.[54] Fishermen farmed the fishing rights in the great rivers, such as the Maas and the Rhine, from the reigning lords. The fishery was divided into sections. The lords safeguarded the borders and mediated in the event of a conflict. I do not mean to claim that salmon was more expensive per unit of weight than herring—herring fishery required boats, too, and you could buy salmon, per piece,

[53] Van Moolenbroek (2003) 424; compare: Van Heisterbach, *Dialogus miraculorum* IV, 79, edited in Strange (1966) I, 246–247; a later version of the story by a contemporary of Jacobus van Vitry (died in 1240) in: Greve (1914) 24–25; he specifies the large fish as pike and salmon.

[54] Martens (1992) 114–134.

at the fish market—but if you wanted to impress your guests with a whole fish, you had to pay a lot of money.[55]

Did large fish actually taste good? Or, to quote the notable words of Goudriaan, in imitation of Freeman, what position did large fish hold in the 'hierarchy of experience'?[56] Taste is strongly determined by culture, and varies per region and through the centuries. Most of the luxury fish mentioned here are still considered tasty today. Prerequisites would seem to be that large fish have bigger (fewer) bones and more (boneless) flesh. They are easier to fillet than small fish and the flesh is often firmer, more similar to meat than that of small fish. Pike and eel are exceptions, however: they are known to be extremely bony. This can be resolved by making soup from the fish and sifting out the bones, or preparing the fish in some other fashion. In the menu of the Knights Hospitallers of St. John, boiled pike is offered as a substitute for other fish, which is fried.[57] Eel and pike were eaten in a vinegary jelly.[58] The acidity softened the bones (as with pickled herring); this meant that the fish did not have to be filleted; the bones were simply eaten along with the rest of the fish.[59]

It is possible that medieval people found pike, with its many bones, as troublesome to eat as we do today. Yet in the Middle Ages, some foods were served for the simple reason that their presence on the banquet table was a sign of status; they did not necessarily have to be edible. This was true of peacock, a bird that made a fantastic impression on the table, because it was served in its own plumage, but the meat was considered tough and unsavoury. Likewise, pike made its grand appearance in *entremets*, or 'subtleties', ornamental showpiece dishes that were brought to the banquet table between courses as a form of entertainment. An excellent example comes from a famous cookbook written in 1420 by *Maître* Chiquart, head chef to Duke Amadeus of Savoy. It is a recipe for 'Gilded pike clad as pilgrims'. The pilgrims' procession was preceded by a lamprey, as pilgrim's staff.

Possibly this aspect of table culture was *en vogue* at an earlier time in the Netherlands. At the wedding of Catharina of Bavaria, eldest daughter of the Dutch Count Albert of Bavaria, to Edward of Guelders,

[55] Sicking (2003).
[56] Goudriaan (2003) 448.
[57] Van Winter (2002a) 206.
[58] Janse and Van Winter (2000) 178; Baudet (1904) 92.
[59] Dijkstra and De Haan (1998) 52, 28; Van Neer and Ervynck (1996) 155–164.

which took place from 7 to 9 January 1369 in The Hague, sixty sheets of gold leaf, 1,200 pike and one lamprey were purchased. The pikes that did not take part in the pilgrimage probably ended up in vinegar jelly, because there were jellies on the menu—but no pike.[60] The subtlety was possibly dismantled after the meal and given to the servants, or to the poor. Servants generally ate after the nobles and the distribution of leftovers was common.[61]

Serving pike was a visible manifestation of material wealth. Serving several pike was an even more obvious statement, but covering pike with gold leaf as part of a fantastical showpiece was truly a masterful display of status. But why was that considered so amusing, a pike dressed as a pilgrim? There may have been a connotation of contrast. The pike, a creature that survived at the cost of others, played a part in a religious procession. This motif can also be found in the widely known tale of Reynart the Fox. Reynart disguises himself as a pilgrim in order to escape the wrath of the court. To that end, he solemnly accepts the pilgrim's staff and bag from the court chaplain. Then he kills the hare that he has fooled with his disguise and feeds it to his young. The author of the later text editions, probably dating from the fifteenth century, stresses that the hypocrisy of the fox dressed as a pilgrim is so funny that it would make everyone laugh, even the sad at heart.[62]

The prestige lent to the count's table by the eel also explains why the fish enjoyed the count's special protection. Philip of Burgundy ordered that not a single reed, or any other plant, be removed from the banks of Haarlemmermeer (Lake Haarlem) and the other bodies of water north of the town of Leiden. He claimed that if pike were unable to find enough to eat along the shore, it would swim on to someone else's fishing waters. As a result, Leiden would suffer great losses, because of the decrease in income from leasing out fishing rights on the lake. The lessees of the Leiden fishing rights were the very same people who supplied the pike for the wedding.[63] Whether one should deduce from this safety measure that pike was scarce, or was beginning to be so because of habitat alteration, is difficult to say. The same is true for

[60] Janse and Van Winter (2000) 175, 183.
[61] Harvey (1993) 173.
[62] Wackers (2002) 141–147, lines 3015–3023.
[63] Van Mieris (1759) 701; Janse and Van Winter (2000) 174; Van Kan (1988) 85–87. On the wedding see also: Van Winter (2002).

pike as for all large fish: they are relatively more scarce in an ecosystem than small fish.

Poor people's fish

Which fish were clearly *not* luxurious? Judging from the menu of the servants of the Knights Hospitallers of St. John, smaller fish were part of the normal diet: small sea-fish (herring and plaice) and small freshwater fish (roach). But the only fish the Knights Hospitallers of St. John themselves did not eat was stockfish. There is hardly anything known about the small freshwater fish. Ypma remarks that, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, various types of small freshwater fish were considered a delicacy by the poor. The rather unappetizing ruff, with its large head and spiny fins, was in great demand among the 'poor folk', in Amsterdam, Haarlem and Leiden. Ruff was eaten as an hors d'oeuvre.[64]

In all the financial accounts, we find large quantities of preserved herring during Lent. They were bought and consumed by the barrel (500–1,000 herring). The delivery or production system was of great importance. The consumption of herring at the court of Voorne was on the low side, with a mere 100–300 herring a week during Lent in 1456. In Voorne, the herring in the Lenten season had to compete with fresh sea-fish like haddock, smelt, and salmon. The household of the tax collector of Lobith, which consisted of approximately fifteen people, consumed, in a Lenten week in 1427, 500 smoked herring and half a barrel of salted herring.[65] But herring was also an important fish outside the Lenten season. For the siege of Utrecht, which lasted a month (26 June to 27 July 1345), a huge quantity of fish was shipped in for the troops, both fresh and preserved: 324,500 smoked herring, 11,500 salted herring (twelve barrels), 51,000 salted eels (51 barrels), 10,825 cods, six barrels of haddock and two porpoises. Quantity-wise, herring was definitely in the lead, but in terms of weight, the proportions work out slightly differently. According to De Graaf, the smoked and salted herring amounted to a total of 42,495 kilograms. This was

[64] Ypma (1962) 31.
[65] Van Winter (1981) 340, 342; Van Uytven (1998) 165.

exceeded only by the cod, at 64,950 kg; the other types of fish remained far below 10,000 kg.[66]

That herring was the ideal 'fish for the fast' is generally accepted by cultural historians, but the Dutch herring production did not reach its height until the seventeenth century, after the Reformation and the abolition of voluntary asceticism in large portions of Europe. This is an indication that the fish had gained an important place on the daily menu.[67] This is also in keeping with the thesis of Lampen, mentioned earlier, about the relationship between rising (urban) populations and the increase in fish consumption. According to the dike account of the Regional Water Authories of Rijnland in 1516, the servants ate herring every Friday. The servants belonged to the urban middle class. Among these servants, for example, were also messengers from the Water Authorities. Gillis Gillisz and Gerrit Jansz van Abbenbrouck lived in the finest neighborhoods of Leiden, on the Breestraat and the Kort Rapenburg. In 1562 Van Abbenbrouck was taxed for a house in Maredorp, which he probably rented, and which placed him qua capital at the bottom of the upper 30 percent of the payers of the Leiden *Tiende Penning* tax, together with a barber, a shipmaker, a cabinet maker and a greengrocer.[68]

The Regional Water Authorities of Rijnland gave annual gifts of *tijbokking* to its contacts within the councils of the Habsburg government in Brussels, Mechelen and The Hague.[69] Tijbokking was smoked herring caught in the IJ, a different sort than the herring caught near Scania on the Baltic Sea and the North Sea. It lived along the coast and in the Zuiderzee and the IJ. The higher one's rank, the more herring one received. The presidents of the various councils and tribunals and the stadhouder of Holland and Zeeland were honored with 1,500 herring, the other noble councilmen received 500–750 herring, and ordinary lawyers and attorneys were given 250 herring. The Knights Hospitallers of St. John also ate herring in various forms: cooked and preserved. All in all, herring does not seem to have been a fish with any particular

[66] De Graaf (1996) 391. His figures of sizes and weights of fishes are minimum ones. In the past fishes used to be larger: see the works of Van Neer and Ervynck; a tarbot of 90 cm in: Laarman and Lauwerier (1996) 94.

[67] Unger (1980) 256.

[68] Noordam (2001) 31 and appendix; for the archival sources see Van Dam (2003) 491, note 80.

[69] Account of 1550–51, Leiden, Hoogheemraadschap van Rijnland, Oud-archief, inv. nr. 9572, appendix.

status; its significance was comparable, depending on preparation and use, to the abovementioned fish heads. Instead of large, prestigious fish, one could also give gifts of an impressive quantity of smaller fish.

Flatfish like flounder and plaice, were caught on the coast in great quantities. The flatfish fishery was part of the coastal fishery. According to De Vries and Van der Woude, large quantities of fish from the coastal fishery were sold in the fifteenth century by way of the IJssel, via Cologne to the Rhine Region all the way to Basel. In the first half of the sixteenth century, fishermen from the Dutch coastal villages were still transporting such large quantities of dried plaice to the Whitsun Market in Antwerp that they even attracted wholesale buyers from Cologne, Metz, and Strasbourg.[70] This information comes from the fish treatise of Adriaen Coenen, the fish expert from Scheveningen. He also reported that plaice was caught from February—when the sun had gained enough in strength to dry the fish—until June. All the large villages north of Scheveningen took part in the plaice catch. For the purpose of illustration, Coenen added a map of the coast with the villages in question, and a drawing of the plaice fishermens' boats with their nets hung out, all along the coast. In the Lenten season, hundreds of barrels of fresh plaice were sold daily at the market in Scheveningen. Salted plaice were also sent in barrels and baskets to Cologne, Metz, and especially the region of Gulik and Kleef.[71]

Coenen specifically provides a drawing of plaice in two different states: fresh, with the characteristic orange spots, and dried, shrunken and headless, like Norwegian stockfish. He probably assumed that for many of his readers, dried plaice was a more familiar item than fresh. Unique to the plaice was that, every spring, it installed itself in dense masses along the coast, probably to spawn. Coenen quotes fishermen as saying that the mass of fish, in some places, was more than one and a half metres thick, a figure clearly based on soundings.[72]

In addition to plaice, there was also a great deal of flounder caught in the coastal fishery. The flounder fishermen came mostly from the cities along the Maas, Lek, East and West Schelde estuaries. Flounder is very similar to plaice, but prefers fresher water. The estuaries form the ideal habitat. It is no wonder, then, that the court of Voorne consumed huge

[70] De Vries and Van der Woude (1995) 241.
[71] Egmond (1997) 119.
[72] Egmond (1997) 119.

quantities of flounder: 200 to 1,000 fish a week, all year round. The fish arrived in baskets of 100 flounder each. The export of dried flounder was primarily oriented toward the region of Kleef and Gulik.[73]

The stock of dried plaice and other dried fish, according to a local chronicler, was traditionally stored in Beverwijk.[74] In illustrations, one occasionally sees wooden drying installations near the coastal villages.[75] The way in which the flatfish were treated and transported can be seen in children's toys: miniatures of dried flatfish have been handed down in late seventeenth-century dollhouses, tied together at the head with bits of string and hung in the kitchens, like sausages.[76]

Stockfish is depicted in the literature as the least appetizing fish. Huge quantites of stockfish were sold. In 1435, when the court of Guelders was on the march, 78 percent of its purchase of fish consisted of stockfish. The pattern of shipping in a large quantity of stockfish during Lent can also be seen in the account of the tax collector from Lobith (1428–29).[77] In the Kampen ship toll account, levied in the years 1438–41, Captain Lambert Gerijtsz shipped in 1,100 stockfish.[78] The import of Norwegian stockfish in the Netherlands was known as far back as the thirteenth century.[79]

The German *Hansa* had control of a large portion of the stockfish trade in Bergen; in the late Middle Ages this shifted from the eastern to the western Hanseatic cities of Bremen and Hamburg and, around 1550, to Amsterdam. Stockfish was made by drying cod in the air, without salt. The fish was hung across racks to dry all along the Norwegian coast, but especially in Nordland, where the climate was most suitable. Stockfish had a storage life of three years.[80] The Dutch also produced preserved cod, but this was a different type. It was caught in the North Sea and salted right on the boat, and was known as *laberdaan*, or salt fish. This fish would not be of much importance until 1600, according

[73] Egmond (1997) plate XII, 118–120.
[74] Van Venetien and Verwer (1974) 66.
[75] Frederik Muller, Loterijplaat voor de stichting van een nieuw gasthuis in Egmond aan Zee, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, FM 1306, in the background, at the right; Keurboek Egmond 1592–1690, Alkmaar, Streekarchief, Gemeentearchief Alkmaar, Egmond aan Zee, inv. nr. 1.
[76] Pijzel-Domisse (2000) 156.
[77] Van Winter (1981) 341.
[78] Smit (1919) 255.
[79] On the stockfish trade see chapter six in this volume.
[80] Ubbens (1997) 17, 20.

to Ubbens, although she was thinking primarily of export.[81] I suspect that cod was preserved for local consumption much earlier on the Dutch coast. The wagonloads of cod mentioned above, purchased by the Count of Holland, would almost certainly have been preserved fish.

Conclusion

Two different types of eating regimes can be distinguished. The religious, formal eating regime, with rules imposed by the church, was in force for all classes and ranks. The rules concerned the biological-theological classification of the animals consumed, fish versus four-footed land animals, regardless of the method of preparation. Fish, thanks to its diverse cultural connotations, was the ideal substitute for meat during the days of voluntary asceticism. Clerics had more stringent abstinence regimes than the laity, and this was expressed in (among other things) the number of calendar days with fish on the menu.

The social, informal eating regime differed per socio-economic group and per ecosystem. The rules concerned the level of the species, and even of individuals; large specimens were preferred by the elite. Not all types, however, were by definition luxury or poor people's fish; the method of preparation was equally important, and some fish had a neutral status, such as salted herring, and fish parts, such as codfish heads.

The diversity of the sources consulted shows that the history of medieval gastronomic culture cannot be based solely on literary sources and illustrations. Financial accounts provide information on seasonal variables, which sheds more light on the factor of scarcity. Using bone material, it is also possible to take ecological factors (such as fish stock) into account.

There was an ecologically determined basis to fish consumption. People tended to eat whatever was easiest to obtain in their vicinity. On the coast, this was primarily cod and flatfish. But on days of abstinence, especially during Lent, the demand for fish was too great for the supply and people had to revert to preserved fish, sometimes from afar. Salted and dried herring was to be found on nearly every table. For those of lesser means, stockfish was shipped in from Scandinavia. In addition to stockfish we see, in the sixteenth century, dried flatfish

[81] Ubbens (1997) 21.

on the menu, and some evidence of the preservation of cod from the Dutch fishery exists from the fourteenth century onwards. It is not impossible that trade in such fish was much more widespread before the import of stockfish, especially in the eastern Netherlands and the countries along the Rhine. Sources show that in the fifteenth century, dried plaice was already competing with stockfish, but was still sold abroad until the sixteenth century.

Whether one finds fish in written sources or in excavations, the relationship between the fish in the water and the fish dish on the table is by no means linear or univocal. Factors of importance in reconstructing eating patterns include natural availability. *Which* fish can be found *where*, and where are some fish more scarce, or plentiful, than others? Scarcity can contribute to the social status of a fish. Not only 'type' determines scarcity, but also size. In nature, there is a relative scarcity of large fish, and this seems to have been reflected in the composition of the medieval menu. Only notables could allow themselves large fish. The combination of the two—exotic and large—was to be found on the dining tables of royal courts and elite ecclesiastical orders. Large sea-fish, such as haddock, and large freshwater fish, such as the native pike and salmon or the eastern European carp, were luxury fish.

Fish was eaten for religious reasons, in particular in times of fasting and abstinence, but *when* and *how often* was also determined by material factors. Fish was a meat substitute. The number of meatless days for the laity was over 135 a year in the Netherlands; in Holland, probably even more than 178. In addition to fish, eggs and dairy were customary meat substitutes—foods that, in the wetland environment of the northern and western Netherlands, were undoubtedly available in abundance. Each meatless day did not necessarily mean an extra burden on the natural fish supply. A large proportion of the catch was exported to other countries in Europe that also had a great demand for fish, but little or no fish of their own. In the season of Lent, despite the natural abundance of fish, people still had to resort to preserved fish. Another conclusion is that on the Sundays in Lent, which did not fall under the Lenten regime, certain groups of clerics ate fish nevertheless—festive fish, of course, since the choice of food was a reflection of one's religious, social *and* ecological position. Coastal dwellers in the Netherlands really appreciated fish.

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